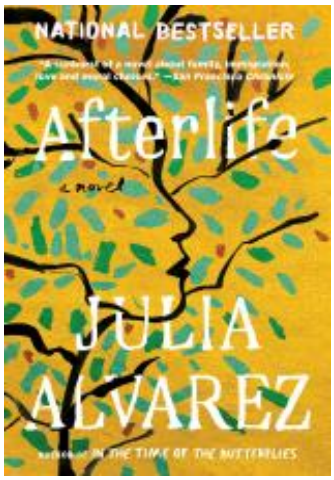
Afterlife

by Julia Alvarez



About the Book

The first adult novel in almost 15 years by the internationally bestselling author of IN THE TIME OF THE BUTTERFLIES and HOW THE GARCIA GIRLS LOST THEIR ACCENTS

Antonia Vega, the immigrant writer at the center of AFTERLIFE, has had the rug pulled out from under her. She has just retired from the college where she taught English when her beloved husband, Sam, suddenly dies. And then more jolts: her bighearted but unstable sister disappears, and Antonia returns home one evening to find a pregnant, undocumented teenager on her doorstep. Antonia has always sought direction in the literature she loves --- lines from her favorite authors play in her head like a soundtrack --- but now she finds that the world demands more of her than words.

AFTERLIFE is a compact, nimble and sharply droll novel. Set in this political moment of tribalism and distrust, it asks: What do we owe those in crisis in our families, including --- maybe especially --- members of our human family? How do we live in a broken world without losing faith in one another or ourselves? And how do we stay true to those glorious souls we have lost?

Discussion Guide

1. Antonia and her sisters are close and clearly love one another; at the same time, like many siblings, they argue, put each other in boxes, and are not always supportive. How are the sisters similar, and how are they different? Which parts of their relationships felt familiar to you, if you have siblings?

2. Antonia notes that in many ways, her husband, Sam, remains alive in her head: she often wonders what he would say or do, and she lets that guide her own actions. Do you think Antonia would have made different decisions about Mario, Estela and Izzy if Sam had still been alive?

3. How do you feel about the actions Antonia ultimately takes to help Mario and Estela? Does their story change your thinking about immigration in America? If so, how?

4. Discuss the sisters? plan to get help for Izzy and the ways that it backfired. What do you think about how they handled the situation?

5. The sisters all have distinct roles in the sisterhood, and Antonia also had a defined role in her relationship with Sam (bad cop to his good cop). How did Sam?s death change the way Antonia viewed herself? How do you think Izzy?s death will alter the roles of the sisterhood? What is your role in your own family? Is it accurate, fair?

6. Antonia is often viewed as the selfish sister. Despite this, she struggles with recognizing and asking for what she needs. In AFTERLIFE, she is frequently called on to assist others. How do you think this helps her better understand her own needs?

7. Antonia frequently recites lines from her favorite authors and poets, and their words provide comfort and wisdom. Do you think these literary references are always helpful? Do you have poems, songs, books or other stories that you return to when you need comfort? How have the arts helped you in a dark time?

8. When we have identified an injustice or problem in our world or in our family, do we have a responsibility to address it? Antonia remembers a Tolstoy story with three questions: What is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do? How do you decide the balance between taking care of yourself and taking care of others?

9. Antonia observes that ethnicity and race are often used by the sisters as their personal loophole. How do ethnicity, race or culture qualify how we care and commit to community, self, family?

10. Why do you think this book is set in Vermont, a state with a relatively small Latino population? How might the demographics of her home influence Antonia?s choices?

11. Does the Japanese repair technique described in the epilogue feel relevant to your own life?

12. Who in this book has an afterlife?

Author Bio

Julia Alvarez left the Dominican Republic for the United States in 1960 at the age of 10. She is the author of six novels, three books of nonfiction, three collections of poetry, and 11 books for children and young adults. She has taught and mentored writers in schools and communities across America and, until her retirement in 2016, was a writer-in-residence at Middlebury College.

Her work has garnered wide recognition, including a Latina Leader Award in Literature from the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, the Hispanic Heritage Award in Literature, the Woman of the Year by *Latina* magazine, and

inclusion in the New York Public Library?s program ?The Hand of the Poet: Original Manuscripts by 100 Masters, from John Donne to Julia Alvarez.? IN THE TIME OF THE BUTTERFLIES, with over one million copies in print, was selected by the National Endowment for the Arts for its national Big Read program, and in 2013 President Obama awarded Alvarez the National Medal of Arts in recognition of her extraordinary storytelling.

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